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a dog's life

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A dog, with luck, can find itself cosseted from the dog bed to the grave. By Diana Dekker

WHERE you're born counts, as a dog. The poor old rural variety still work themselves to the bone on a lump of meat and a string of swear words. For a Wairarapa farm dog, love and luxury is a rough pat and a grubby kennel. Like slaves, they're chained for life when not slogging in the fields. Not for them shampoos and daycare, toys and electric blankets in old age.

Better to be born a Wellington dog with a well-heeled and besotted owner. Better still, needless to say, to be born in the United States, where they are capable of giving a goldfish a diamante-studded collar if it is the household's one true pet.

Pet suppliers and service providers are only just putting their feet up a little after the Christmas rush - all those a hair-dos, all those presents, all that festive pet food. People like Murray Hill at Animates in Porirua were rushed off their feet getting in enough smoked pigs' ears to keep the customers happy. The pigs' ears are just a little something to take home, a taste of things come. And that's not a dry old bone. Mr Hill sells food for dogs - depending on supply - that many people don't find on their menus. Ostrich mince, for instance, wallaby, diced venison, steak and kidney and orange roughly.

"Fish is good for dogs. Omega oil is good for their skin and coat," says Mr Hill.

Orange roughly came in a couple of weeks before Christmas. It was really destined for fine human dining overseas but the order was cancelled, and went to the dogs.

Why would a spoilt dog eat anything less? Or sleep on anything less than a good bed with an electric blanket. Mr Hill sells them too, some for older dogs suffering from arthritis, some for pups, some just for mollycoddled dogs. The bed ensemble can be installed in an insulated, anti-flea kennel.

Not that the indulged dog gets to be incarcerated in a kennel. It's so mean to leave them on their own during the day they can be chauffeured to somewhere like Smart Dogs, a sort of club for the privileged dog, where Carl Orams will take them rambling over a hundred hectares or so of pleasant Porirua farmland.

Rather more overtly than at gentlemen's clubs, the dogs sometimes try one-upmanship. You can, says Orams, compare 20 dogs unleashed and on an afternoon in the country with a rugby game, the handler being the referee. handler. "It's not like a table tennis game with no handler. Male dogs can be trouble." Fortunately 90 per cent of the spoiled dogs are de-sexed, which makes for reasonably good behaviour.

Bringing beauty to the beast is good business around Christmas and holiday time. Dapper Dogs' Carol Meilink says a cut and blow dry for a dog is more taxing than titivating your ordinary customer.

"Human clients don't nip you and jump around. Dogs tend to mat up a lot easier than humans too."

But compared with what goes on in the US, Wellington's dog-beauty business is rudimentary. There isn't quite the deference to the dog's psyche here, or the plastic surgery, or both.

Dogs in the US suffering the psychological trauma of castration can go under the knife and be fitted with artificial testicles. The dog looks the same, feels the same and doesn't even realise he's neutered, claims the manufacturer.

The American idea of daycare for dogs is not a daily 100-hectare ramble but a purpose-built luxury resort. In New York, barely a bone's throw from Grand Central Station, there's a five-floor, 6700-square-metre canine heaven called Biscuits and Bath. There, several of the dogs really do arrive in chauffeured limousines to work out in the gym, supervised by a trainer, or have a shampoo, or a swim in the heated spa, or rest on a futon bed or snack on a pet pizza, for only NZ\$ 85 a day, not counting the annual fee of up to \$ 3750.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, an \$ 13 million resort opened last year, the **Olde Towne Pet Resort**. It has a five-star penthouse suite with expansive views, 24-hour attendants and tasteful decor with original artwork. The usual hydrotherapy pool, gym massage room and beauty parlour are available.

In December the Hollywood film studio Warner Brothers launched a range of luxury dog clothes including a satin dog coat lined in pink silk, studded with Swarovski crystals and not far off \$ 3000. The diamond-encrusted platinum dog-collar pendant costs close to \$ 35,000.

Slightly more affordable, eau de toilette, "light, fresh, unisex and very trendy", created by a team of ex-Givenchy perfumers mindful of American besottedness with pets and named Oh My Dog!

But would a New Zealand dog appreciate diamonds and French perfume?

"I can't afford a diamond necklace for mine," says SPCA dog handler Carolyn McKenzie.

"Dogs definitely appreciate kindness, attention and care. A good bed would probably appeal and a comfortable collar."

Her pick of toys is "a Kong, it's like a rubber beehive. You can fill it up with things like peanut butter or marmite and they can sit all day and lick the middle out of it.

"The most important thing is to give your dog a job. When they've got nothing to do is when you have behaviour problems, barking or biting the postman on the bottom."

All types of dogs can be trained, for example, to get the newspaper, she says. "You've got to break things down in to baby steps."

She suggests clicker training, reinforcing positive behaviour with a click followed by a reward such as food, a pat of praise, until the click is associated with reward.

"It's just a matter of working out what stimulates them and makes them happy and what you can do to improve and enrich their environment. The best thing is to set them up to succeed. Never put your dog in a situation where it can get into trouble."

After a lifetime of indulgence, what more can you do but send a dog out in style.

Grief over pets is underestimated, says Paul Dewight of Animal Cremations. "There are, how can I put it, two kinds of people: those whose pets are gone and they don't want to know and the others who treat their pet as a person they love and care for. People talk to pets more than their partners. A person who doesn't have a pet doesn't know that."

Mr Dewight's cremator is located at Rongotai and deals with departed animals from Palmerston North south. Even big dogs are no problem to Mr Dewight. He once cremated a shetland pony.

Two out of three people, he says, want the ashes of their beloved pet back.

"I've got a client, you go in to the house and she has little boxes of pets in a china cabinet and they look nice, little square rimu boxes with plaques."

Mr Dewight's solution to burying the ashes but keeping them portable from home to home is to put them in a plant pot and plant an attractive little flowering tree above them. "If you're in a flat you can take your pet anywhere you go."

He doesn't recommend stuffing for even the most treasured of pets.

"When they're stuffed all you're getting is the skin. The eyes are false, everything else is false," he says.

Mr Dewight has a small grieving room where people can be alone with the pets he has laid out on display. Some people spend a lot of time, some a little. Some people want the ashes of their doted-on dog back in a hurry.

"Once they get them back they're home to stay. They're not going anywhere else."

CAPTION:

Pampered pooch: Above and main image, Dead Sea mud packs improve skin condition and hair.

Walkies: After the treadmill, these doggie darlings head for the hydrotherapy pool.
Pictures: REUTERS

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